

Chaliapin, Patriotic Russian Singer, Reflects Love of Country in His Roles

Great Muscovite Basso Gives Unusual Interview Telling of His Kindly Feelings Toward America and Describing the Attitude of the Soviets Toward Artists—Will Appear at Metropolitan Again, Probably in "The Barber of Seville"

SHINING brilliantly in the operatic skies, with occasional flashes in the concert firmament, is Feodor Chaliapin, the great Russian basso. Not even the rigor of life under the Soviet rule in his native land has marred his art. Indeed, the accompanying interview with this most talked of singer reveals an appreciation by the ruling Muscovite powers that is a pleasant contrast to their attitude toward other forms of civilization. Chaliapin's 1921-22 American season is the most memorable of his career, making this story most timely.

By WILLIS STEELL.

MUCH water has flowed down Mother Volga since the season of 1907, when Conried brought over to astonish the patrons of the Metropolitan Opera House the great Russian basso, Feodor Chaliapin. Almost for the first time in the history of this home of music a voice of this kind constrained the most dignified among the critics to say in the vernacular that it made American audiences "sit up."

The Chaliapin who has returned this season to sing a few repetitions of the tremendous rôles to which he now confines his voice is as man and singer very different from the artist and individual who performed this feat fourteen years ago. No artist can remain stationary and no individual could pass through experiences like Chaliapin's who has been shut up in revolutionary Russia for seven years (in a gilded cage and not a prison) without showing the marks.

And a quarter of a century of singing and spectacular living, while it has left this artist's large physique still powerful, has thinned his blond hair and planted a few crow's-feet under his small, deeply set and piercing sapphire colored eyes.

The voice, too, while losing none of its magnificent force, has gained in suavity and gathered shades of color and interpretation which formerly he knew not, or did not value. The lively histrionic sense has lost its kinship to melodrama and touches nature in a closer embrace, but it fortunately still suggests the grand romantic pose. Vivid and varied remain the adjectives that express his art.

Like Tamagno, Is the Victim Of Anecdote Mongers.

Chaliapin, like Tamagno, has been a victim of the anecdote mongers; the yarn about the tenor washing his own socks and drying them on the footboard of his bed and the stories of how Chaliapin, Tartar or cave man, used to seize a chicken in either hand and devour them simultaneously, are about all the younger generation who never heard either man sing know about them. Stories like these are never dying; like truth, when crushed to earth, they rise again.

The Chaliapin of to-day on the Metropolitan boards and in his hotel apartment seems like a vast improvement over his former self, at least to one cold observer. This observer remembers with a shudder of dislike the picture he gave of *Mephistopheles* in Boito's score. In its knotted nakedness it ranks in his memory with that one of Salvini, when, to represent the virility of Samson, the actor attached a sheepskin, with the hair outside, to his breast. Neither picture is a pleasant memory, but the *Mephisto* in its effect of nakedness seemed more true. There is no account extant which says that Lucifer, son of the morning, packed any clothes when he took his sudden exodus from heaven.

The contemporary atmosphere of Chaliapin in his temporary home in New York is that of a well bred man of the world. Suave, easy and tactful, he talked of himself without false modesty, dwelling only on the things which hold a general interest, like his early and unprotected days in his birthplace, Kazan, where only ambition and will power gained him the knowledge of how to read and write. He told of how he learned the trade of a shoemaker, while his chum, Maxim Gorky, was apprenticed to a baker in a shop opposite, and how the two, breaking away from these humdrum surroundings, got work on a railway loading cars with melons for 17 cents a day. He explained how he joined a band of strolling players, learned to act a little and to sing a little, and how, eventually, he became a pupil of Ossotoff in Tiflis ("I est uori," interjected Chaliapin), and after a year's study at the age of 17 made a debut in the opera "Galka" in that city.

His Manner Freezes Us When Chance Question Falls

These and other incidents of the same nature, presenting his career with the high lights and dark shadows—for there is prison gloom in it as well as the dazzle of the stage—were related easily and suavely, without pretension, and with ready application of the graces of the French language in which he told them. Everything went smoothly and as was to be expected in this interview, except that now and then a question having been asked which fell out of the general routine his interlocutor

As the remorseful Czar in "Boris Godunov," Mussorgski's best known opera here, Chaliapin exhibits his great histrionism.



Above, in center, is Chaliapin as *Mephisto* in Boito's opera, and under it is the Russian star as *Ivan the Terrible* in Mussorgski's opera of the same name.

return engagements in England, but my stay anywhere must be short, for as a feeble but earnest member of my Government I do not wish to be long away from Moscow.

"My poor Moscow! My poor friends and neighbors, who exist without heat, without food! In spite of every evil I am happiest among my own, for whom I wish, as I ought, to do what I can to brighten their lives. Yes, it is pleasant to be here, pleasant to see all the world again, but one's home is ever the goal, however wide the circle.

"On my way I passed through Berlin, sang there indeed, and last saw my friend Gorky. He is very ill, very; his condition, which is not new, for his lungs have long been affected, is very bad indeed. I think of him sadly often, and especially when in my recitals I sometimes sing his words. Or when I sing the 'Chanson de Prison.'"

"You see it ends on a note of comedy. Ah, we Russians are melancholy; the world calls us so, but the world should realize also that Russia is a land of great contrasts.

"It is this ignorance of Russia that is most deplorable. People think we never laugh there. How mistaken are they! In my music, I know, the Russians, like myself, love the romances and the dramas of our poets, they love the operas of Modest Petrovitch Mussorgski—his 'Boris Godunov' and 'Khovanshtchina,' but they love more, yes, they adore 'The Barber of Seville' and that laughing opera of Glinka, in which as *Farlaf* I made my debut in 'Russian and Liudmilla.' It is a grave

error to think we Russians never smile, for we are born comedians!

"Perhaps Americans will learn to know us better and grant us the possession of this wholesome trait when our evolution has progressed a little further. It lives and smiles in spite of everything, and in a strange atmosphere of dirt, ignorance, superstition there shine out qualities to which this Russian smile lends the highest light. For compounded with these things which are being shaken off there have never been found wanting devoted courage, incredible patience and stoical endurance."

No better opportunity would ever arise than to slip to the singer the following question:

"What is the attitude, the mutual attitude, of artists and revolutionaries?"

The genuine artist, according to M. Chaliapin, is never the product of an aristocracy, or only now and then has the world seen an exception to the fact that from the people come the great dramatic and lyric artists. He is therefore in sympathy with true democracy, not the democracy which is a catchword of politics. No downfall of civilization is to be feared when, as has been true in Russia throughout these fateful years, actors, singers, dancers found in the people their true admirers and best friends.

What was true in France in her typical revolution, when Talma acted and Arnould sang and countless other actors and singers and dancers kept open house in the theaters, has been repeated in Russia.

A returned traveler, Marguerite Harri-

Portrait study of Feodor Chaliapin, famous operatic and concert singer, whose career under the Soviet furnishes a thrilling story.



Don Basilio of the "Barber of Seville," a comedy role, permits the basso to reveal another side of his talent.

are to be seen again, there seemed to be no good excuse for Chaliapin to be melancholy; he is so nevertheless.

Indeed, all the sons of Holy Russia give this impression. Beyond the circle of his immediate scene seems to lie a great space. It often appeared to the writer that the singer who sat opposite him at a small table was not there. And as he talked of his country and his country's ballads, which of all music he prefers to sing, this impression deepened.

Outside the window there was not the mere width of a city street but a great space which flowed through it, pressing upon him as if the space were a windy steppe, isolating him, causing him to appear indifferent to the effect of his words, making him seem sincere and open minded.

The interviewer does not insist that everybody would feel this uncanny effect of isolation, but he wishes to convey the impression made upon himself. Perhaps it may have been due to Chaliapin's speaking in a tongue that was foreign to himself and to his listener. Language thus used, passing thought through media, can hardly fail to be evasive.

In his own tongue Chaliapin is said to talk not with the inevitable careful exactness—or stiffness—of translation, but flowingly. Even beneath this cloud the singer's speech revealed variety and transparency. The personal impression of the singer justifies the romantic which he has always been said to convey with a remarkable emotional power. But he always came back to earth after fusing his thought into a moment of intensity, sending it out as it were, to all the silent spaces and then calling it back and turning away in the end with a little shrug of his shoulders.

With the exception of the roles of *Leporello* in "Don Juan" and *Basilio* in "The Barber of Seville," Chaliapin has cut away all except Russian opera. He expects to sing the latter role in New York before he departs, and is eager to do so.

Eager to Show Just Why Russians Adore Him

"I wish to show with what reason the Russian people like me in this work, the libretto of which, although it does not fully carry all of the revolutionary message of Beaumarchais, yet has enough of it to be acceptable to the Russians. When our people come to the opera to hear it they laugh like fools.

"Rachmaninov's opera 'Aleko,' written on a poem of Pushkin, is another great favorite in Moscow. I hope some day it will be produced here and that I may sing the role. The poem, which was written in 1824, belongs to the picaresque school. *Aleko* is a social outcast, who figures over and over again in Pushkin's work. Weary of a conventional world he joins a tribe of wandering gypsies and falls in love with their leader, the beautiful *Zemfira*. For a time they are rapturously happy, until the capricious girl is fascinated by a younger man, a member of her own tribe.

"In the history of *Zemfira* that of her mother repeats itself and, owing to this, when the heroine is discovered about to flee with her gypsy lover and is killed by *Aleko* the gypsies, led by the old queen, do not exact his life in punishment but drive away from them the guest who has brought discord and bloodshed into the free and simple life of the caravan, and the curtain falls upon the melancholy figure of *Aleko* left once more alone in the world.

Chaliapin's furlough, so to speak, from the Bolshevik Government is for four months. He sang constantly both for his fee and for charity during the last seven years which have seen Russia more or less involved in war. His London concerts, given on the way to this country, were attended by very great audiences. Asked about the enormous fees which, it had been asserted, he had been paid by the Soviet Government, Chaliapin smiled and said:

"When I was 17 I received 20 rubles for my first concert. For my latest concert in Moscow I got 500,000 rubles. Both fees were the same, about ten dollars."

Artists Treated Tenderly And Able to Keep Property

Artists of every kind, beginning with Chaliapin, have been treated by Lenin and Trotsky with a fatherly tenderness, suffered no hardship, been permitted to keep their belongings, in luxuries as well as necessities, and their landed estates. Chaliapin owns two houses in Moscow, one in Petrograd, and a country estate besides. In this ownership he has not been molested, and it is known that in the harshest days of rationing this singer and his fellow artists were given the best procurable, so that other than altruistically they know not what hardship means.

To quote the author, whose departure from Moscow was almost simultaneous with Chaliapin's own, another word or two from her may be allowed to close the subject. For Mrs. Harrison believes that Russia under Lenin is passing through the last evolutionary stages. Their Government is bound to be permanent. She said to this writer in M. Chaliapin's hotel:

"I am not apprehensive of the effects of Socialist and Bolshevik doctrines, and there is no danger of formal class warfare in Russia. We are witnessing the extension of the more retrograde districts to full citizenship and to the benefits of civilization. In eastern Europe the revolution of 1848 freed the peasants from actual legal serfdom, and the further stage of giving them full economic independence is now in progress."

Acknowledging as he did the foreigners' forecast of his country's future and fully believing that its roseate hues—such perhaps as shone on it in Catherine's day—